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### Friendly and antagonistic contact between former spouses after divorce

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**FRIENDLY AND ANTAGONISTIC CONTACT BETWEEN FORMER SPOUSES AFTER DIVORCE:  
PATTERNS AND DETERMINANTS \***

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# **FRIENDLY AND ANTAGONISTIC CONTACT BETWEEN FORMER SPOUSES AFTER DIVORCE: PATTERNS AND DETERMINANTS**

## **SUMMARY**

This study presents descriptive and explanatory analyses of contact between former spouses, using data on 1,791 previously married men and women in the Netherlands. We employ a typology of three types of relationships between former spouses: friendly contact, antagonistic contact, and no contact. Many couples maintain contact, and ten years after divorce still almost half of the respondents report contact with their former spouse. Especially the number of former couples with antagonistic contact decreases strongly over time. In multivariate models, we examine six hypotheses, concerning the role of: (a) duration, (b) prior attachments, including joint children (c) prior conflicts, (d) life-course events after divorce, (e) liberal family values, and (f) personality. Important predictors of post-divorce contact are duration since divorce, prior economic ties, the presence of joint children, marital duration, conflicts during marriage, a new relationship, and liberal values. Couples who had children together have both more friendly contact and more antagonistic contact than couples without joint children, but the difference is largest for antagonistic contact.

## **FRIENDLY AND ANTAGONISTIC CONTACT BETWEEN FORMER SPOUSES AFTER DIVORCE: PATTERNS AND DETERMINANTS**

### **1. Introduction and research questions**

A divorce is the end of a marriage but not always the end of a relationship. Former partners may continue their relationship in many ways, ranging from an incidental telephone call or post card on the one extreme, to frequent and recurrent visits of each other on the other extreme (Weiss 1975; Jacobson 1983). Post-divorce contact not only differs in frequency but also in nature. In some divorces, former partners will have a warm and friendly relationship, whereas in other divorces, the relationship can be antagonistic. Partners may continue the conflicts that led to their divorce, partners may behave aggressively toward their former spouse, and partners may seek unwanted contact.

The determinants of the frequency and nature of ongoing contact may differ. Some of the contact after divorce will reflect earlier dependencies between spouses, such as children, mutual friends, or financial arrangements. Other contact may exist because former spouses are still attached to each other and find it difficult to break off their attachments completely. Contact may also continue because people have norms about how to behave after a divorce. Some people believe that they can continue, or even should continue, to be friends when a relationship dissolves, while others think a divorce should be a radical break with the past. Whether contact after divorce is friendly or antagonistic may depend on a range of factors. Antagonistic contact can be the result of earlier conflicts between the spouses or it can be introduced by the divorce itself, such as conflicts about visiting arrangements and alimony payments. Friendly contact can develop because the marriage was brief without deep conflicts or because the former spouses simply learn to deal with the post-divorce relationship in a positive way. This article will test these and other ideas about the determinants of the frequency and nature of post-divorce contact, employing recently collected data in the Netherlands.

In the research literature, interest in contact between former spouses has increased considerably over the past decades. This growing interest stems from two different theoretical perspectives. First,

there is a psychological literature on personal relationships that has examined contact between former partners, including former marriage partners. This literature starts from the concept of attachment and examines to what extent continued attachment after a separation affects the well-being of the two partners. Attachment is often defined in terms of feelings (missing a person, preoccupation, mourning, and so forth), but it also includes the element of interaction with the former partner. The leading hypothesis in this literature is that continued attachment between former spouses has negative consequences for the well-being of those involved and for the adjustment people make toward normal life after a relationship dissolution (Tschann, Johnston et al. 1989b). Later studies introduced more complex hypotheses by distinguishing between different dimensions of attachment (Masheter 1997). Some forms of attachment are believed to be detrimental whereas others are not or may even be beneficial. Part of this literature also focuses on unhealthy forms of attachment, and more specifically on the rising occurrence of stalking. Stalking is a more general phenomenon, but it has often been studied in the context of broken intimate relationships (Mechanic, Weaver et al. 2000). A general characteristic of these psychological studies is that the studied samples are small, that the couples or persons studied belong to clinical and thus selective types of divorced couples, and that the analyses are limited to recently divorced couples. This segment of the research literature offers no representative picture of post-divorce relationships and gives little insight in the long-term development of contact between former spouses.

A second segment of the literature that examines contact between former partners can be found in family research. In the divorce literature, it is often found that the negative long-term effects of divorce on children's well-being and socio-economic outcomes can be attributed to the conflicts that existed before the parents separated (Amato 1993; Cherlin, Furstenberg, et al. 1991; Dronkers 1999; Fischer & De Graaf 2001). This means that for the sake of the children, it is better to divorce than to stay in a bad marriage (Morrison & Coiro 1999). An assumption in this reasoning, however, is that conflicts will end when the marriage ends. If conflicts continue and if former spouses maintain an antagonistic relationship, the children may be negatively affected whether the couple splits or not (McLanahan & Sandefur 1994). Children with divorced parents who have maintained an antagonistic relationship after their divorce may even have two disadvantages, since they experience both the lack

of resources that characterizes a single parent family and the negative effects of the antagonistic relationship between their parents. Authors who examine the consequences of divorce for children have therefore also become interested in studying conflicts between parents after divorce (Buchanan et al. 1991; King & Heard 1999; Kline et al. 1991).

Although post-divorce contact has been studied from different perspectives, it has primarily been studied because of its consequences. The psychological relationship literature studies the negative effects on the well-being of the former partners, while family research focuses on the effects on children's well-being and life chances. Less is known about the determinants of post-divorce contact than about its consequences and even less is known about the conditions that make contact between former spouses friendly or antagonistic. Exceptions are early studies by Goode (1956) and Kitson (1982), and a more recent study by Masheter (1991). Goode (1956) relates attachment during marriage to attachment after divorce. Kitson (1982) focuses on feelings of attachment after divorce and relates this concept to social resources on the one hand and to characteristics of the marriage and the divorce on the other hand. Masheter (1991) focuses on affect for and preoccupation with the former spouse as dimensions of attachment and relates these two concepts to life-course variables such as children and remarriage.

Shifting the focus from the consequences of post-divorce contact and attachment to their causes is important for several reasons. First, knowing under which conditions contacts become discordant is relevant in light of the growing popularity of more cooperative styles of parenting after divorce, such as co-parenting (Wallerstein & Blakeslee 1989). Second, studying the causes of post-divorce conflicts has implications for the study of the consequences of divorce. To measure the consequences of continued attachment, one first needs to assess whether those who maintain contact are a select group with respect to relevant social, cultural and psychological characteristics. Such information can only be obtained by studying the causes of post-divorce contact. Third, studying the causes of post-divorce contact and conflicts may tell us something about the nature of divorce and may therefore shed new light on the divorce itself. Is divorce a clear break with the past or is it a lingering process rather than an event in the life course?

The first aim of this paper is to give a representative description of the nature of the relationship between former spouses after divorce. Our focus is on the behavioral aspects of post-divorce relationships and not on the emotional aspects of this relationship, as they have often been studied in the psychological literature on attachment. More specifically, we focus both on whether there was any contact and whether this contact was friendly or antagonistic. Antagonistic contact includes continuing arguments with each other, aggressive or violent behavior of one or both former spouses, and unwanted contact. We describe how often these kinds of contact occur and how quickly they disappear after the divorce. Our second aim is to explain why some couples have more contact or more conflicts after divorce than other couples. For this purpose, we present a set of existing and new hypotheses. For the description and explanation of the short and long term variation in friendly and antagonistic contact after divorce we will employ data from a nationally representative life history survey recently conducted among ever divorced people in the Netherlands (Kalmijn & De Graaf 1999). The data contain detailed information about characteristics of the first marriage, the nature of the divorce, and developments in the period after divorce up to the moment of the interview. The data include men and women, divorces with children and divorces without children, and persons who have remained single after divorce and persons who have remarried (N=1791).

## 2. Hypotheses

To explain why some spouses have more contact after divorce than others, and to explain why this contact is either friendly or antagonistic, the literature has suggested a range of variables, determinants, and hypotheses. In this contribution, we systematically develop and test *six hypotheses*. Some of these are derived from or based on earlier research, some of these are new. In all hypotheses, we make a distinction between effects on having friendly contact versus no contact at all, and effects on having antagonistic contact versus no contact at all. In addition, we assume that some factors may have an effect on conflicts in general, whereas others may only have effects on certain kinds of conflicts, like conflicts about children or financial arrangements.

## 2.1 The time hypothesis

Our first hypothesis is that *contact after divorce will be less frequent if the time since divorce is longer*. As time goes by, most spouses will be successful in building up a new life and creating new economic, social, and emotional ties (Booth & Amato 1991; Melichar et al. 1988; Kitson 1992: 153). We therefore expect that attachments after divorce will weaken the longer spouses have been separated (Jacobson 1983: 200; Kitson et al. 1989: 17; Kitson 1992: 265). We further expect that antagonistic contact will decline in frequency sooner because there are more reasons to end that type of contact.

## 2.2 The hypothesis of prior attachments

The second hypothesis is that *contact after divorce will be more frequent when attachments were stronger during marriage*. These effects will be strongest shortly after the divorce and the effects will decrease over the years. This general hypothesis first implies an effect of marital duration. The length of the marriage is expected to correlate positively with contact between the spouses after divorce. Marriage creates ties between spouses in all sorts of ways, and it will therefore be more difficult to end the relationship for couples who have been married longer (Madden-Derdich & Arditti 1999: 247; Weiss 1975: 87).

The hypothesis about prior attachments can also be applied to three more specific types of attachments: emotional, social, and economic attachments. Persons who are strongly emotionally attached to the partner will find it more difficult to separate completely (Goode 1956: 292; Madden-Derdich & Arditti 1999). We therefore expect a positive effect of emotional dependence on the likelihood of contact after divorce. We expect this effect to be stronger on antagonistic contact since emotional dependence may result in unhealthy preoccupation with the former spouse (Madden-Derdich, Leonard et al 1999).

Strong social attachments during marriage will also result in more frequent contact after divorce. Children are the most important example. It is generally expected that post-divorce contact is more



frequent when spouses have joint children (Jacobson 1983; Coysh et al. 1989; Masheter 1991). This will especially be the case when the children are still young since parental obligations motivate former spouses to discuss visiting arrangements for their children and other child-related matters. The arrangements that have to be discussed and the contact itself will often be difficult and thus may lead to conflicts. Former spouses who do not have friendly contact can avoid each other much easier when they do not have children. Therefore, we expect that the effect of children on antagonistic contact will be stronger than the effect on friendly contact. It is also important to distinguish between conflicts about the children themselves and other conflicts. It is likely that the effects will primarily apply to conflicts about the children themselves. It is also possible, however, that there are spillover effects. Specific conflicts about the children may lead to more general conflicts, especially if the children are still young.

Another example of a social attachment lies in the lifestyles of couples. Former spouses who had most of their friends and leisure time activities together during marriage will be more dependent on each other than spouses who had more separated social lives (Kalmijn & Bernasco 2001). After divorce, those persons will face greater problems in building up an individual social life. The reason is that the networks of spouses will have more overlap, and as a result, the probability that divorcees will meet their former spouse by accident when visiting parties or attending other social activities is much larger. For this hypothesis, it is not clear whether the nature of increased contact is friendly or antagonistic. We also expect that the effects of shared leisure time will decrease over time.

Post-divorce contact will also be more frequent when economic ties are stronger. Joint home ownership is an important example. Contact that originates from economic ties is obligatory and may have a high conflict potential. We therefore, expect a strong effect of economic attachments on antagonistic contact and no effect on friendly contact. Weiss (1975) finds evidence from his qualitative study that the strength of economic ties reduces rapidly after divorce. So, for economic ties, we expect, just like we did for emotional and social ties, that the magnitude of the effects will decrease sharply over the years.

### 2.3 The hypothesis of prior conflicts

Our third hypothesis is that *contact after divorce will be more frequent when there were more relational conflicts in marriage and less frequent when there were more practical conflicts or behavioral conflicts* (Tschann, Johnston, et al. 1989a: 440; Tschann et al. 1989b). These effects will diminish the longer people have been divorced. Relational conflicts are defined as conflicts about the quality of the relationship between the spouses. Examples are that the spouses gave each other insufficient attention, understanding and love, or that they were estranged from each other. Practical conflicts have to do with the daily organization of life. Examples are conflicts about the division of household tasks and conflicts about the working hours of one of the spouses. The third type of conflicts stems from behavioral or personal problems of one of the spouses. Examples are problems with alcohol or drug use and the spending thrift of the spouse.

We expect a positive correlation between relational conflicts and the frequency of post-divorce contact, because former spouses may feel the need to make things up with each other. They also may need each other to better understand the divorce. In a sense, the marriage will linger on. In these divorces, we not only expect more friendly contact, we also expect more antagonistic contact. The reason for this is that relational issues have a high conflict potential.

Marriages with much practical conflicts may more often lead to a 'clean break' after divorce and therefore to less post-divorce contact. The simple fact that former spouses no longer live together can already solve many of the marital problems. Moreover, feelings of resentment or treason will probably not be strong. In a sense, this is a more neutral sort of conflicts, which leads to low levels of, both friendly and antagonistic contact.

Finally, we expect that behavioral problems during marriage will have the strongest negative effect on the post-divorce relationship. If a person has problems with alcohol abuse or has other serious personal problems, he or she will be avoided by the former spouse. In addition, we expect that, if there is contact, for instance, because someone is worried about the former spouse and supplies support, this will very likely be problematic and therefore often antagonistic contact.

## 2.4 The hypothesis of life-course events

Our fourth hypothesis is that *contact after divorce will be less frequent when people have experienced new life-course events after divorce* (Goode 1956). One important development is if and when one of the former spouses starts a new relationship (Masheter 1991: 105). A new relationship improves a person's well-being and social adjustment (Demo & Acock 1996: 198; Garvin, Kalter et al. 1993) and reduces the degree to which a person is emotionally attached to or preoccupied with the former spouse (Marks & Lambert 1998: 674). It also reduces the frequency of contact because such contact is unpleasant for the new partner. The possibility for reverse causation exists here as well. People who remain attached to their former spouse probably have more difficulties in finding someone new (Goode 1956: 276-298). Both, the likelihood of having antagonistic and friendly contact is expected to be lower after one of the former spouses starts a new relationship.

Another important aspect in the life course of former spouses is the growing up of children.

Analytically, this is the same as the age of the children, which is already discussed earlier.

## 2.5 The hypothesis of modern divorce

Our fifth hypothesis is that *contact after divorce will be more frequent when people have more liberal views on family issues*. This is a relatively new hypothesis, which is suggested by the cultural and demographic trends that have occurred in the last decades. Traditional marriage lost ground to new variants of marriage like cohabitation, living-apart-together, and never-married single mothers. Although some of these new forms remain rare, new living arrangements have become more accepted in the general public. One aspect of this cultural change is the increasing acceptance of divorce. According to some authors, these trends have given rise not only to new kinds of relationships, but also to a new kind of divorce (Brinkgeve 1982). In this new divorce, partners are believed to be more rational and less emotional about their decision to separate and believe that it is possible to part as good friends without rancor. In other words, it is no longer considered necessary or even desirable to break up all contacts with the former spouse (Brinkgeve 1982: 53).

Although there is no systematic empirical evidence for this new approach to divorce yet, we think it has an important implication for post-divorce contact and conflicts. The hypothesis we suggest is that former spouses with less traditional family values will have more contact after divorce. A more difficult question is whether modern couples will also have fewer conflicts than traditional couples. On the one hand, one could argue that tolerant attitudes towards divorce imply fewer conflicts because people have fewer negative feelings about their divorce. On the other hand, one could argue that contact between former spouses after divorce will have a conflict potential in any case, and that liberal attitudes will not prevent such conflicts from surfacing. We therefore hypothesize an effect on contact only and leave predictions about the kind of contact open.

## 2.6 The hypothesis of personality and divorce

Our sixth and final hypothesis is that *contact after divorce will be more common when people have a neurotic personality*. This is also a relatively new hypothesis that is based on earlier evidence that personality has strong effects on the social relationships that people develop (Asendorpf & Wilpers 1998). Emotionally less stable or neurotic persons generally have more problems to maintain friendly contact. These persons will have more problems with a normal regulation of the feelings of attachment, both positive and negative, towards the former spouse. Too much attachment in the post-divorce relationship is expected to have negative consequences for individual well-being thus promoting preoccupation (Tschann, et al. 1989b). We therefore expect a positive effect of neuroticism especially, although not exclusively, on antagonistic contact.

## 3. Data and descriptive analysis

We use data from a life-course survey with an overrepresentation of ever-divorced persons in the Netherlands. The survey ‘Divorce in the Netherlands’ (Kalmijn & De Graaf 1998) is collected in 1998 and is based on a stratified sample. First, a selection was made of 19 Dutch municipalities, representative for the Netherlands with respect to region, urbanization, and political party preferences.

Second, from the population registers of these municipalities, three random samples of persons between ages 30 and 75 were drawn: (a) a sample of first married persons; (b) a sample of divorced persons who were not remarried; and (c) a sample of divorced persons who were remarried (Kalmijn, De Graaf & Uunk 2000). For the analyses in this study, we selected all respondents who were ever divorced (N=1,791). In structured face-to-face interviews, respondents were asked about their first marriage, about the process of the divorce, about the relationship with their former spouse after the separation, and about remarriage and other life-course events. The 1,791 divorces have taken place between 1949 and 1998, and, due to the rapid increase in the divorce rate in the Netherlands, the average year of divorce is 1985. This implies that the average duration between divorce and the time of the interview is 13 years. Our analyses are based on cross-sectional comparisons of respondents with varying duration since their divorce. We will interpret the results of the cross-sectional comparisons as life-course developments, although we recognize that the results may be biased if there are cohort effects on post-divorce contact. The normalization of divorce in Dutch society may have led to more contact between former spouses in younger divorce cohorts (Brinkgreve 1982). If respondents from younger cohorts indeed have more contact with their former spouse than respondents from older cohorts, the downward life-course development in contact frequency we expect to find will be overestimated. This is due to the fact that respondents with short durations since divorce necessarily belong to recent divorce cohorts. In the multivariate analyses, this problem needs less attention since most of the potentially disturbing characteristics, especially educational attainment and modern family values, are included in the models.

### 3.1 The dependent variable: three types of post-divorce contact

We distinguish between three types of post-divorce contact between former spouses. The first type of contact occurs when former spouses have had no contact at all during the last year. The second type of contact occurs when former spouses have had friendly contact during the last year, that is contact without conflicts. The third type of contact occurs when former spouses have had antagonistic contact during the last year. This typology is based on a number of questions referring to the year before the

interview took place. First, respondents were asked how long ago they had had the last contact with their former spouse. About half of the respondents (54 percent) responded that they had contact with their former spouse in the year preceding the interview. Second, the respondents were presented a list with possible types of conflicts. We used 14 items of this list, divided in four categories: (a) items on gossiping and other types of verbal harassment (slandering, blackening name, false accusations); (b) items on unwelcome contact (visits and telephone calls); (c) items on aggressive behavior (shouting and cursing, threatening with violence, actual violence); and (d) domain specific items (set children on, threatened not to pay alimony). The respondents were asked whether their former spouse had ever done these things during the last year. The Appendix presents detailed information on the conflict items. Respondents who had contact in the year preceding the interview and who did not report any of the 14 forms of conflicts are classified as having friendly contact. If one or more forms of conflicts occurred during the year preceding the interview, we assumed that they have antagonistic contact. This typology results in 37 percent respondents with friendly contact, and 17 percent respondents with antagonistic contact. We also experimented with more detailed scales of problematic contact between former spouses, which included information about the amount of post-divorce conflicts. However, we found that the distinction between the three types of post-divorce contact leads to a parsimonious and elegant description and analysis.

The questionnaire does not include questions about the respondent's own problematic behavior, since it was considered likely that self-reports would have led to serious underreporting. This makes that conflicts initiated by the respondent are not captured in our contact typology, leading to an underestimation of the proportion of former couples having antagonistic contact. However, we have reasons to expect that most relationships will be categorized correctly. First, antagonistic behavior of the respondent will often exist along with antagonistic behavior of the former spouse. For such couples there is no classification problem. Second, we suppose that antagonistically behaving respondents with a friendly behaving former spouse tend to project their own antagonistic behavior on their former spouse, and these couples will be classified correctly as well. Nevertheless, some of the couples we classified as having friendly contact may have an antagonistic relationship. Probably, this lack of

accuracy in our typology will attenuate the effects in our regression analysis and will make our tests conservative.

### 3.2 Independent variables

In this section, we describe the independent variables. Table 1 presents the mean values of all variables at selected durations since divorce. Details of the measurement of the variables are presented in the Appendix.

< Table 1 about here >

*Duration since divorce:* The number of years since the spouses stopped living together. We use the natural logarithm of duration since we expect that the effect of duration on the type of contact is not linear but decreases over the years.

*Duration of marriage:* The natural log of the number of years the marriage lasted.

*Prior emotional attachments:* Respondents were asked to evaluate their own and their spouse's reaction to the divorce at the time the divorce occurred on a five point-scale, ranging from very positive to very negative. We assume that if one or both former spouses felt negatively about the divorce, prior attachment is stronger than if both spouses were not negative about the divorce decision.

*Joint children:* Three dummy variables indicate whether former spouses have children in age categories 0-12, 13-18, or older than 18 at the time of the interview. Couples without children are the reference group.

*Shared leisure time:* Respondents were asked whether they never, sometimes, or often spent time on five types of activities and social contacts without their former spouse during marriage. A scale was created that measures the frequency of shared leisure time activities (see Appendix).<sup>i</sup> Terhell et al. (2001) use the same items and find a negative effect of shared leisure time on new social activities after divorce.

*Home ownership:* Whether the former spouses were joint owners of their home during marriage.<sup>ii</sup>

*Prior conflicts:* These are measured by questions about marital conflicts and divorce motives. The marital conflict items refer to the first five years of marriage, and the divorce motives refer to the last period of the marriage. Hence, they give complementary views on pre-divorce conflicts. We distinguish between the three types of conflicts as defined earlier: relational conflicts, practical conflicts, and behavioral conflicts. The selection of the items for the different conflict types is made on a theoretical base and the Appendix shows which items are used for which type of conflicts.

*New partner:* Whether the respondent lives with a new partner (cohabitation or marriage). Unfortunately, we have no information about new relationships of the former spouse. We also examined the effects of having children with a new partner on pre-divorce contact between former spouses, but we did not find any effects.

*Liberal family values:* Because direct questions about value patterns in the past would be unreliable, we used questions about past behavior that are proxies of values (referring to the first five years of the marriage). The following items were used: (a) reading books about self-actualization or new age; (b) visiting new age meetings; (c) reading books on women's liberation; (d) visiting women's liberation meetings; (e) voting for left wing (green) political parties; (f) using own surname during marriage (only for women). Kalmijn et al. (2001) showed that a scale containing the same items on emancipation and left wing voting has a positive effect on women's divorce risk.

*Neurotic personality:* Based on a self-completion list from the 'Big Five' personality items (Goldberg 1990; see also: Bouchard, Lussier, et al. 1999).

We control for the respondent's sex and educational level. To facilitate the interpretation of the effects in the multivariate models, all scales have been linearly transformed to variables with minimum 0 and maximum 1.

#### 4.1 Results

The three panels of Table 2 give an overview of how post-divorce contact between former spouses changes after the divorce. Panel A distinguishes between five possible types of contact among former spouses, separately for male and female respondents. Contact by phone is by far the most frequent



kind of contact, followed by visits from or to the former spouse. Not surprisingly, going out together is the least frequent kind of contact. The high percentages of reported visits and contacts at parties may primarily be caused by activities relating to the children, like children's visits to the non-resident parent and birthdays. The last column of Table 2 shows whether the differences between couples who have just divorced, couples who have divorced three to ten years ago, and couples who have divorced longer ago, are statistically significant (F-test). All kinds of contact decrease significantly when time passes, with one notable exception: contact at parties. A rather stable 20 percent of former spouses see each other at birthday parties of children, other relatives, or mutual friends. If there is no bias in the way divorced men and women report about contact with their former spouses, no differences between men and women should be found. Indeed, Panel A does not reveal any significant difference between 'male' and 'female' reports.

<Table 2 about here>

Panel B shows changes broken down by friendly and antagonistic contact. The proportion of former couples with no contact increases. The proportion with antagonistic contact decreases, but the proportion with friendly contact first increases and then decreases to a little above the level in the first years after separation. In Panel B, there is only one significant difference between the male and female respondents. Among spouses who separated more than ten years ago, male respondents report somewhat more friendly contact than female respondents. For the rest, the male and female reports on post-divorce contact are similar.

Figure 1 presents the changes again, this time separately for couples with and without joint children. The graphs are based on multinomial logistic regression models with one predictor variable only, the natural log of the number of years since separation. There are large differences between former spouses with and without joint children. More than 30 percent of the couples without children lose contact in the first year after divorce, and the percentage of couples without contact increases to 50 percent after five years and to 60 percent after ten years. Figure 1 also makes clear that among childless couples, both the proportion of former spouses with antagonistic and the proportion of

former spouses with friendly contact decrease over time. After 10 years, 60 percent of the divorced couples without children have no contact, 35 percent have friendly contact, and 5 percent still have antagonistic contact.

<Figure 1 about here>

For former spouses with joint children, Figure 1 shows that 10 percent of former spouses lose contact immediately after the separation. In the first year after the separation, about 70 percent have antagonistic contact and 20 percent have friendly contact. Over the years, the decline in contact continues, but to a much lesser extent than among childless couples. After 10 years still about 70 percent of former spouses with children have contact, and after 20 years the proportion with contact is still about 50 percent. For couples with children, we observe that the decrease in antagonistic contact goes together with an increase in the probability to have friendly contact. Apparently, shared responsibilities for children make that these couples continue to have contact, and as time goes by many of them overcome their problems. Thus, the overall stability in the proportion of couples with friendly contact is explained by two offsetting changes: a transition from friendly contact to no contact, which is the typical pattern of former couples without children, and a transition from antagonistic contact to friendly contact, which is the typical pattern of former couples with children.

In Panel C of Table 2, we present details about antagonistic contact. We observe that in the first two years after divorce, about 40 percent of the respondents report verbal harassment, about 25 percent report unwelcome visits or phone calls, and about 50 percent report aggressive behavior. The fourth category of post-divorce conflicts (domain specific conflicts) is not included here since the items involved do not add up to a clear scale. All forms of antagonistic contact gradually decrease over time, although even after 10 years, the occurrence of each form of antagonistic contact is still reported by 5 percent of the divorced men and women. Men and women report the same amount of aggressive behavior but women more often report physical threats and actions by the former spouse, whereas men more often report verbal aggression by the former spouse.

## 4.2 Multivariate analyses

To test our hypotheses, we use two multivariate regression models. In Table 3, Model A is a logistic regression model in which the outcome variable is dichotomous; it distinguishes between couples with and without contact. Model B is a multinomial logistic regression model in which the outcome variable has three values: no contact, friendly contact, and antagonistic contact. In both models, couples without contact are the reference category. The regression models include all independent variables, as well as selected interaction terms of independent variables and (log) duration since divorce. We hypothesized that prior attachments and prior conflicts will lose their impact on contact over time. The main effects of prior attachments and prior conflict in the models refer to effects of attachment and conflicts in the first year after divorce. Note, that the ages of the children refer to the time of the interview so that the interaction between having children and duration since divorce is taken into account implicitly.

In Table 3, the models are estimated on all 1,791 respondents in our sample. Since the presence of children is a dominant tie in marriage, the effects on post-divorce contact may interact with the presence of children. For that reason, we also present the models separately for respondents with (71%) and without (29%) children (Table 4). The figures in Table 4 should be interpreted with some caution since the number of respondents without children is rather small: 134 respondents with friendly contact, 37 respondents with antagonistic contact, and 350 respondents without contact. We find that most of the effects do not differ between couples with and without joint children, but we will discuss the results when differences occur.

### *Time since divorce*

In line with the descriptive results printed in Table 2, the multivariate results in Table 3 show that duration since divorce has a negative effect on post-divorce contact, and especially on antagonistic contact. The effect of duration on friendly post-divorce contact is substantial but not significant. The last column of Table 3 indicates that the effect on friendly contact is not significantly different from

the effect of antagonistic contact. Because, the interaction effects with duration make that the main effects of duration cannot be interpreted straightforwardly, we initially estimated multivariate models without interaction effects. In these models, the effects of duration are statistically significant in all cases ( $p < .001$ ). The effect of duration on any contact is  $b = -.837$ , the effect of duration on friendly contact is  $b = -.596$ , and the effect of duration on antagonistic contact is  $b = -1.432$ . Moreover, we find that duration since divorce has different effects for couples with and without children. The decline in friendly contact is stronger for couples without children ( $b = -.744$ ) than for couples with children ( $b = -.457$ ), but no differences occur for antagonistic contact. Hence, what is special about childless couples is that their friendly contact disappears quite rapidly after divorce.

#### *Prior attachments*

We have five measures of the strength of prior attachments: duration of marriage, emotional dependence, joint children, shared leisure time activities, and home ownership. In contrast to our hypothesis, we do not find that the duration of the marriage positively affects contact after divorce. Perhaps the effect of marriage duration is already explained by the presence of joint children, since divorced couples with joint children have been married longer. Interesting is that the effect of marriage duration does show up in the models for childless couples (Table 4). The longer childless couples have been married, the more contact they have after the divorce, and this confirms our hypothesis. Model B shows that marriage duration only increases antagonistic contact. Apparently, for couples without children, marriage duration becomes a better indicator of prior attachments.

In line with our hypothesis, we find that couples with joint children have more contact than childless couples. Model B shows that having joint children especially increases the probability of antagonistic contact. To prevent the tables from becoming too dense, no separate models are presented with general effects of having joint children or not (in any of the age groups). The sizes of these general effects are 1.664 on having any contact versus no contact, 1.267 on having friendly contact versus no contact, and 2.757 on having antagonistic contact versus no contact. No substantial changes in other effects occur when replacing the three child variables for one general variable. In the section

on life-course events below, we discuss the differential effects of having children in different age groups.

Table 3 further shows that couples who were stronger emotionally attached to each other during marriage have no higher probability to have either antagonistic or friendly post-divorce contact than couples with lower levels of emotional attachment. We expected that couples who had most of their leisure time activities and social contacts together, would see each other more frequently. Model A shows that this hypothesis is not supported in our data.

Economic ties do increase post-divorce contact: former spouses who owned the house they lived in have a larger probability of maintaining friendly contact after divorce. In the first years after the divorce, the odds ratio of having friendly contact between home owners and other former spouses is 3.5 (antilog of 1.251). As expected, we also observe that the effect of home ownership decreases over time.

#### *Prior conflicts*

Relational conflicts during marriage appear to increase the probability of post-divorce antagonistic contact. The interaction effects of relational conflicts and duration are not significant.

Couples who had practical conflicts during marriage have, as we expected, less contact after divorce, which suggests that such couples can have a clean break. The negative effect of practical conflicts is present for both friendly and antagonistic contact. This effect decreases over time, in line with our hypothesis.

Behavioral conflicts, such as conflicts about alcohol abuse and personal problems, have no significant effect on the probability to have post-divorce contact. We expected that respondents avoid former spouses with behavioral problems, but this is apparently not the case. In Model B we observe a positive effect on antagonistic contact which is consistent with our expectation that if there is contact, it will be of an antagonistic nature. In Table 4 we observe that the effect of behavioral conflicts is stronger for couples without children.

#### *Life-course events*

The expected negative effect of remarriage (including cohabitation after divorce) on post-divorce contact is highly significant. The estimates of Table 3 indicate that both friendly contact and antagonistic contact occur less often for respondents who are living with a new partner. Note that the negative effect of ‘repartnering’ on antagonistic contact is twice as large as the effect on friendly contact.

Earlier we found that former spouses have more contact if they have children. Model A in Table 3 shows that this effect changes over the life course of the children. For former spouses who have young children (under 12), the odds of having contact versus having no contact are 9 times higher than the odds for former spouses without children. This effect decreases when the children become adults, although the odds of having contact are still 3 times higher when the children are older than 18. The odds for former spouses with young children to have friendly contact are 5 times higher than for spouses without joint children, whereas the odds to they have antagonistic contact are 22 times higher. Hence, joint children clearly create contact after divorce but this is mostly antagonistic contact.

#### *Liberal family values*

We expected that persons with liberal family values have more contact with their former spouse. The results of both models clearly support this hypothesis. The odds to have contact with the former spouse are 3 times as high for respondents with liberal values than for other respondents. An interesting additional result is that liberal values increase the odds of having antagonistic contact as well, not only the odds of having friendly contact.

#### *Neurotic personality*

The personality trait neuroticism has a strong effect on contact after divorce. People with a neurotic personality have more contact with their former spouse than others. In line with our hypothesis, we also find that the effect is strongest for antagonistic contact. The ongoing attachment we assume to be connected to a neurotic personality leads to antagonistic contact after divorce.

In addition to the models reported in Table 3 and 4, we checked whether the domain specificity of some conflict items has an influence on the effects we find. We repeated the complete analysis with a dependent variable in which the domain specific conflict items (with respect to children and alimony arrangements) are left out. We have inspected all coefficients, and found the changes to be very small. Only very few effects lost or gained statistical significance, and in these cases the sizes of the effects hardly changed. The effect of neuroticism on friendly contact for example changed from a non significant effect of .540 to a significant (for  $p < .10$ ) effect of .657. We conclude that there are spillover effects of domain specific conflicts on other, more general conflicts.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been twofold. The first aim was to describe the frequency and nature of post-divorce contact between former spouses in the Netherlands. Using representative data on remarried and single divorced men and women in the Netherlands, we showed that contacts between former spouses are quite frequent. Even ten years after their separation, almost 50 percent of the divorced in the Netherlands report that they had some kind of contact with their former spouse during the last year. Important additional conclusions are obtained by distinguishing friendly and antagonistic contact. Former couples with joint children are obliged to maintain some contact, and this results more frequently in antagonistic contact than is the case for childless couples who separated. Our findings suggest that for couples without children, divorce can be a clean break with the past. A positive finding for couples with children is that the stronger motivation of these couples to maintain contact leads to an increased frequency of friendly contact with the number of years since the divorce. This increase is not found for couples without children.

The second aim of the paper was to identify determinants that explain individual variations in post-divorce contact. Earlier studies on the determinants of post-divorce contact have concentrated on basic demographic variables, such as marriage duration and the presence of children. We presented a systematic list of hypotheses, we used more direct measures of existing hypotheses, and we developed and tested several new hypotheses. Our analyses lead to four more general conclusions.

First, attachments built up during marriage are important for the continuation of contact after divorce. In other words, a divorce is the end of a marriage, but not the breakdown of earlier ties. This conclusion is not only supported by the effect of having joint children, but also by the effects of home ownership and marital duration (for couples without children).

Second, conflicts during marriage are an important factor in understanding what happens after divorce. Marriages with relational conflicts linger on after divorce and former spouses do not succeed in handling the new situation without problems. This conclusion is suggested by the positive effects of relational conflict during marriage on antagonistic contact after divorce. Marriages with practical conflicts often result in a 'clean break' after divorce. Behavioral conflicts do not lead to a fast break between former spouses after a divorce, but they often lead to a continuation of antagonistic contact.

Third, ties between former spouses can be broken by new life-course experiences. Repartnering—one of the most important life-course events after divorce—decreases the probability of both friendly and, even more so, the probability of antagonistic contact between former spouses. In addition, children tie former spouses together, but this tie weakens as the children grow older.

Fourth, contact after divorce depends on the characteristics of the individual spouses. Respondents with more liberal family values often have more contact with their former spouse. Our interpretation is that persons with liberal values have a different view of divorce and tend to believe in the notion that former spouses can still be friends. Interesting is that this approach has its downside as well: modern values not only bring about more friendly relationships, but also increase the probability to have antagonistic contact with the former spouse. Next to values, we find that having a neurotic personality increases the probability of having contact, especially that of antagonistic contact. This is an important finding; it suggests that for this selective group of vulnerable people, the effects of divorce are more detrimental than for other divorced people. People with a neurotic personality accumulate problems over the life course, which may hurt not only themselves, but also their former spouses and their children.

An important contribution of this article was the distinction between different types of post-divorce relationships. This approach has two important advantages: First, we were able to detect the possible elimination of the effect on total contact by counteracting effects on friendly and antagonistic



contact. Second, by comparing the magnitudes of the effects on the two types of contact, we obtained a more precise description of the role of the different determinants on post-divorce contact. With respect to the first point, we can conclude that for all determinants, the effects have the same direction for the two types of contact. Regarding the sizes of the effects, we find that most determinants have stronger effects on antagonistic contact than on friendly contact. Exceptions are the effect of home ownership which is stronger for friendly contact, and the effect of modern values, which has equal sizes for the two types of contact. Apparently, it is easier to find and measure determinants for antagonistic post-divorce contact than it is for friendly post-divorce contact.

An implication of our findings is that future research on the life chances of children after divorce should take into account the antecedents of the relationship of the divorced parents. The multivariate models presented in this paper show that former spouses with an antagonistic or friendly relationship differ in many respects from other former spouses. In other words, parents with an antagonistic relationship are a highly select group. This selectivity must be taken into account when one wants to assess the effects of parental conflicts on children.

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Table 1      Mean values of the dependent and independent variables at time of interview, by duration since divorce

	0-2 years after divorce	3-10 years after divorce	>10 years after divorce	all
<i>Types of post-divorce contact</i>				
no contact	.15	.33	.58	.46
friendly contact	.27	.44	.33	.37
antagonistic contact	.58	.22	.09	.17
<i>Time</i>				
duration since divorce (0-49)	1.39	6.47	19.01	13.00
<i>Prior attachments</i>				
duration of marriage (0-47)	15.55	14.41	11.14	12.69
emotional dependence (0-1)	.50	.48	.47	.48
shared leisure time activities (0-1)	.63	.63	.64	.63
own house (0=no, 1=yes)	.45	.38	.25	.31
<i>Prior conflicts</i>				
relational conflicts (0=no, 1=yes)	.76	.73	.69	.71
practical conflicts (0=no, 1=yes)	.76	.66	.66	.66
behavioral conflicts (0=no, 1=yes)	.55	.48	.53	.51
<i>Life-course events</i>				
youngest child 0-12 (0=no, 1=yes)	.34	.23	.00	.11
youngest child 13-18 (0=no, 1=yes)	.16	.19	.09	.13
youngest child 18+ (0=no, 1=yes)	.20	.30	.61	.47
other relationship (0=no, 1=yes)	.15	.46	.61	.52
<i>Liberal family values</i>				
index of modern values (0-1)	.17	.16	.15	.15
<i>Neurotic personality</i>				
personality: neuroticism (0-1)	.34	.34	.35	.34
<i>Control variables</i>				
high education (0=no, 1=yes)	.22	.18	.16	.17
woman (0=no, 1=yes)	.56	.61	.59	.60
number of respondents	130	675	986	1791
source: DIN98				

Table 2 Kinds of contact and conflict between former spouses with and without children

		0-2 years after divorce	3-10 years after divorce	> 10 years after divorce	all	significant differences duration
Panel A						
male reports (N=720)	% contact at party	19	25	20	22	---
	% contact by phone	67	51	29	40	**
	% sent card or letter	33	23	12	18	**
	% visited or was visited	44	30	15	23	**
	% went out together	9	11	3	7	**
female reports (N=1071)	% contact at party	22	24	18	20	*
	% contact by phone	74	54	24	39	**
	% sent card or letter	27	21	10	15	**
	% visited or was visited	36	29	13	21	**
	% went out together	5	8	4	6	*
Panel B						
male reports (N=720)	% no contact	14	32	54	43	**
	% friendly contact	30	42	36#	38	---
	% antagonistic contact	56	26	10	20	**
female reports (N=1071)	% no contact	15	32	60	46	**
	% friendly contact	18	39	29#	32	**
	% antagonistic contact	67	29	11	21	**
Panel C						
male reports (N=720)	% gossiping	37	14	5	11	**
	% unwanted contact	18	8	3	6	**
	% aggressive behavior	47	17	7	14	**
female reports (N=1071)	% gossiping	42	17	4	11	**
	% unwanted contact	29	9	4	8	**
	% aggressive behavior	48	18	4	13	**

source: DIN98; #=significant differences in means  $p < .05$  between male and female reports; \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$



Table 3 Effects on relationship type between former spouses (all couples).

all couples	A		B		sig.6 B1/B2
	logistic regression		multinomial logistic regression		
	any contact vs. no contact		friendly contact vs. no contact (1)	antagonistic contact vs. no contact (2)	
<i>Time</i>					
natural log duration since divorce (0-3.9)	-0.967		-0.841	-2.057**	
<i>Prior attachments</i>					
natural log duration of marriage (0-3.9)	0.170		0.034	0.301	
duration*log duration of marriage	-0.023		0.075	-0.203	
emotional dependence (0-1)	1.543		0.681	2.761	
duration*emotional dependence	-0.271		-0.012	-0.559	
shared leisure time activities (0-1)	-0.880		0.070	-2.743	*
duration* shared leisure time activities	0.518		0.123	1.406*	*
own house (0=no, 1=yes)	1.037*		1.251*	0.617	
duration*own house	-0.349		-0.431*	-0.182	
<i>Prior conflicts</i>					
relational conflicts (0=no, 1=yes)	0.949		0.770	1.341*	
practical conflicts (0=no, 1=yes)	-1.943**		-1.877**	-2.943**	
behavioral conflicts (0=no, 1=yes)	0.902		0.474	1.188*	
duration*relational conflicts	-0.341		-0.294	-0.436	
duration*practical conflicts	0.761**		0.671**	1.413**	**
duration*behavioral conflicts	-0.467*		-0.373	-0.380	
<i>Life-course events</i>					
youngest child 0-12 (0=no, 1=yes)	2.152**		1.589**	3.100**	**
youngest child 13-18 (0=no, 1=yes)	2.194**		1.795**	3.238**	**
youngest child older than 18 (0=no, 1=yes)	1.173**		0.938**	1.937**	**
<i>(ref: no children)</i>					
relationship after divorce (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.353**		-0.257*	-0.550**	
<i>Liberal family values</i>					
index of modern values (0-1)	1.220**		1.239**	1.164**	
<i>Neurotic personality</i>					
neuroticism (0-1)	0.828*		0.540	1.524**	*
<i>Control variables</i>					
high education (0=no, 1=yes)	0.332*		0.345*	0.290	
woman (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.424**		-0.354**	-0.627**	
Constant	0.578		0.206	0.769	
Chi square	507.341			728.092	
degrees of freedom	23			46	
N of respondents	1791			1791	
N of respondents with contacts	987		615	372	
source: DIN98; * p < .05      ** p < .01					



## Appendix: measurement of dependent and independent variables

### **Dependent variable:**

Post-divorce conflict:

*gossiping (during last year)*

- former spouse said unpleasant things about respondent to others
- former spouse falsely accused respondent
- former spouse blackened the past

Cronbach's  $\alpha=.82$ ; male respondents  $\alpha=.79$ ; female respondents  $\alpha=.83$

*unwanted contacts (during last year)*

- former spouse called respondent unwanted
- former spouse visited respondent unwanted

Cronbach's  $\alpha=.63$ ; male respondents  $\alpha=.55$ ; female respondents  $\alpha=.66$

*aggressive behavior (during last year)*

- former spouse blamed respondent strongly
- former spouse scolded or quarreled considerable
- former spouse threatened to use violence against respondent
- former spouse threatened to use violence against him or herself
- former spouse used violence

Cronbach's  $\alpha=.71$ ; male respondents  $\alpha=.59$ ; female respondents  $\alpha=.76$

*domain specific conflict items (during last year)*

- former spouse set on children against respondent
- former spouse threatened to hinder the visit of the children
- former spouse often did not keep agreements
- former spouse threatened not to pay alimony

Cronbach's  $\alpha$  not relevant

## **Independent variables:**

### Time

*Duration since divorce* (in natural log of years)

### Prior attachments

*Duration of marriage* until the date spouses started to live separated (in natural log of years)

*Emotional dependence*: average of the initial judgement of the divorce decision from both spouses (5 point scale with 0=very positive, and 1=very negative)

*Children*: former spouses have joint children with the youngest child in one of the three age groups 0-12, 13-17 or 18 and older.

*Shared leisure time activities*: whether former spouses did five leisure time activities often together (1=all five activities often together, 0=no activities often together): (a) going out to a pub, restaurant, cinema or theater; (b) trips like going to events, fairs, making hikes or biking tours; (c) going on a vacation; (d) having diner; (e) meeting with friends, neighbors or fellow workers. Cronbach's alpha= .52

*Own house*: former spouses owned a house after five years of marriage (0=no, 1=yes)

### Prior conflicts

Three types of marital conflict: (0=none of the items mentioned, 1=at least one of the items has been often subject of conflict after five years of marriage or has been a major divorce motive)

#### *(a) Relational marital conflicts*

conflicts: sexuality

motives: spouses had grown apart; lack of attention, understanding and love; spouses were not able to talk well; sexual problems

#### *(b) Practical marital conflicts*

conflicts: religion, view of life, politics; taste concerning furnishing, television, clothes (fashion); leisure time activities spouse; personal habits spouse; division of household tasks; having children or not; upbringing of the children; working hours of the spouse

motives: upbringing of the children; problems with friends/acquaintances of spouse; problems with family in law; spouse worked too much; division of household tasks; leisure time activities spouse; personal habits spouse; differences in taste or preferences; differences in religion

*(c) Behavioral marital conflicts*

conflicts: spending of the spouse; alcohol or drug use of the spouse; infidelity of the spouse

motives: spending of the spouse; physical violence; alcohol or drug use by the spouse; personal problems of the spouse

Note that many respondents report more than one type of conflict: 36% reported 3 types of conflict, 29% reported 2 types of conflict, 23% reported 1 type of conflict, and 12% reported no major conflicts.

Life-course events after divorce

*New relationship:* the respondent lives together, got married or got children with a new partner? (0=no, 1=yes)

Liberal family values

*Index of modern values:* (a) reading books on meditation, self-development, or new age; (b) visiting meetings on meditation, self-development, or new age; (c) reading books on emancipation; (d) visiting meetings on emancipation; (e) voting on left wing (green) political parties; (f) using own surname during marriage (just for women). Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68$ ; among males only variation on the items (a) and (e) exists therefore no  $\alpha$  is presented separately for male and female respondents (0= no items mentioned, 1=all items mentioned)

Neurotic personality

*Neuroticism (vs. emotional stability) (6 self-assessed items with 7 categories):* (a) irritable; (b) nervous; (c) touchy; (d) anxious; (e) fearful; (f) high-strung. Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ; male respondents  $\alpha = .82$ ; female respondents  $\alpha = .78$  (0=not at all, 1=very much).

Control variables

*High education:* respondent has higher vocational or university education (0=no, 1=yes)

*Sex:* respondent is a woman (0=no, 1=yes)

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<sup>i</sup> One may wonder whether effects of this measure also reflect the effects of a traditional marriage.

Prior research in the Netherlands, however, shows that the influence of family values on joint lifestyles in marriage is weak (Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001).

<sup>ii</sup> Although, the relative contribution of former spouses to the total household income is a more direct indicator for economic ties, it also is a very important characteristic of a traditional marriage. We use home ownership because it is a more neutral indicator for economic ties.